



# FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

Yet, though it is like this, simply, flowers fall amid our longing,  
and weeds spring up amid our antipathy.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

## Did you Want to Have a Kid? And Other Impossible Questions

I was recently interviewed by someone about being a Zen Mom. Silly, I know. She asked for my “story,” which I told, about how I was in hell, found Zen, found a teacher, found some comfort, lived in a monastery, found a husband, left the monastery, had a baby, another crisis, some resolution. Repeat. The whole time I felt that disembodied creepiness of my mouth just talking and talking (and talking and *talking*), a runaway train of yakyakyak. I figured I would just say it all in one breath and it would be over. But then she asked, “So how has your practice influenced your life as a parent?”

Well.....

When I say that there is no aspect of my life that is not influenced by my practice, least of all my parenting, this is not to say that I am, in fact, actually practicing or being “mindful” or even a decent person. Far from it. But the deepest part of me, from which everything else radiates, is, so to speak, “influenced” by what I have experienced over the years of practice and training in Zen. And so even when I am a total jerk, it is within the context of the dharma, which is to say, I know better. In my body I *know* there’s more to everything than anything I can see. In other words, what practice has given me is an ever-growing tension between what I am embodying in any given moment, and a feeling of possibility. Oftentimes, this tension leads to disappointment, or frustration, dismayed that I have, yet again, chosen the low road. But other times it leads to the tiniest little pocket of curiosity that can actually save the day.

For instance, a couple weeks ago, A asked me, “Mommy, did you want to have a kid?” followed by, “Do you remember what it was like before you had me?” and then (the doozie), “Do you ever wish you didn’t have a kid, because it’s so much work?” Because of all the years on the cushion, watching the clouds pass, I was able to take a deep breath, even as I tasted the tears rising in the back of my throat. I was able to wait as I watched A’s sweet face watching mine, eyes so soft and for real, just wanting to know if she belongs here, in this world, as if it is up to me. This world. Our quiet little dining room table surrounded by built-in benches and cushions, the big window opening onto the gray November mountain rising at the bottom of our hill. This is the house of her childhood. Hard to believe. I slip and slide through my habitual responses: *Oh, sweetie, of course I wanted you!* Or: *Oh, A, eat your dinner.* If I have learned anything, it’s that, even though it doesn’t always feel like it, I do have options.

And so I said: *Baby, I was cranky before you were born. It’s not you.* I felt like that was what she wanted to know: Am I her fault?

Another thing I have learned is that the world is so vast and so varied that we can never know what is truly happening in another’s sphere. It’s just too complex. But we can sniff around and do our best. In fact, we must. And I

did feel like A was asking more about me and my edginess than about herself and her genesis. And, in fact, she seemed satisfied with my response. Either way, it’s an impossible question to answer. *Did I want to have a kid?* Was I one of those women who pined for a child? Who dreamt of being swept up into maternal responsibility and bustling bliss? Hardly. Honestly, the first time T and I spent time with a couple and their newborn, we left their little plastic-accessory-filled apartment, looked at each, other and said, “Wow, that looks really boring.”

But when it became clear that a life of full-time monastic Zen practice would not work for us (perhaps it was already clear to others?), we decided that our parallel course was decidedly *not* to live in an apartment nearby and practice like monks as much as we could, but to throw ourselves into another pot of boiling water altogether, a completely different way of studying the fundamentals of being human. We would stay nearby, yes, but we would have a baby, or at least we would try. And try we did. We bought this house while still living at the monastery, and A was born a year and a half later.

Did I want to have a kid? Yes, I did. I made a point of it. Did I have any idea what I was getting into? I did not. Knowing what I know, would I do it again? Yes, I would (interviewing myself is so much easier). Not because I realized that something had been missing, or because I believe it is my job to bring children into the world (it is most definitely not my job to do that). And even though raising a child gives me direct access to some fundamental dharma of existence, that is also not why I would choose to do it again. The truth is that I am so drawn into my householder life, and all of its accompanying worldliness, just as the Buddha warned, that “real,” or “formal” dharma practice is, frankly, difficult. Parenting *can* be a strong form or practice, but it can also be distracting.

So why would I do it again, give birth to this human being who needs so much of me, even when I feel I have so little to give? It is an impossible question to answer because it doesn’t make any sense. You could call it the pleasure of picking up My Little Ponies off the floor, making contact with the ghost of my daughter’s perfect hands as she and her long braids played through the house before school, narrating some lower-school, Ramona-infused, barnyard play in a remarkably convincing British accent. Or you could call it a deep karmic love that moves mountains of grief and clears away all the sad dust that has accumulated over lifetimes. Connection is a word some people like. Miracle is another. Taking care of my baby, watching her grow into herself—what can I say? It’s more natural than I ever would have imagined. As my teacher Daido used to say, “It’s not like anything.” And yet it reminds me of sitting. And letting the world heal me with its beauty. ●